



SB 342: Preserving Montana's Tribal Language

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Across the nation, the original languages of American Indians are vanishing at an alarming rate, taking with them a vital piece of the culture of our first people. Now, the 2013 Legislature has the opportunity to help preserve the languages of Montana's tribes. The proposal being considered, SB 342, would establish tribal language programs in reservation schools and engage American Indian youth in saving their languages. However, the impact of these programs reaches well beyond just the preservation of language, for both our students and our state.

Why do tribal languages need to be preserved?

Historically, tribal languages were viewed as impeding the interests of the state-controlled schooling of Native American students. The belief that educators must "kill the Indian...and save the man" was foundational in the development of educational systems on reservations.¹ As a result of this theory, tribal languages were viewed as a hindrance to assimilation, and were banned from schools. This rejection of native languages has had devastating and long-lasting impacts in Indian Country. In fact, it is often viewed as the largest contributing factor in the demise of tribal languages.²

"Saving and further strengthening our Native languages is the very same as saving our own core cultural beings while helping instill a long-neglected sense of pride and self-worth in our peoples."

Dr. Richard Littlebear,
President of Chief Dull Knife College

Currently, 210 Native languages are still spoken in North America. Of those, only 34 (16 percent) are naturally acquired as a first language by Native American children.³ In 1990, Congress passed the Native American Languages Act, which reversed more "than two centuries of Indian education policy"⁴ by creating new goals to "preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages" and use these languages "as a medium of instruction..."⁵ However, years of meager federal funding make this gesture symbolic at best, and tribal languages continue dwindle.⁶

In 1995, the Montana Legislature passed an act establishing English as the official state language. However, this same law explicitly states that, "A school district and a tribe, by mutual agreement, may provide for the instruction of students that recognizes the cultural identity of Native American children and *promotes the use of a common language for communication,*"⁷ recognizing the importance of including Native American culture and language in the reservation schools.

What would SB 342 do?

SB 342 will establish an Indian language preservation pilot program on each of Montana's reservations. These pilots will support the goals of the Office of Public Instruction's Indian Education for All initiative by developing means to provide education in the form of language classes, audio and visual recordings, language immersion camps, creation of dictionaries, and publication of tribal language literature. This work will actively engage tribal language speakers,

allowing them to lend their expertise and making them valuable contributors to the education of Montana's youth. Perhaps most importantly, SB 342 demonstrates Montana's commitment to correcting years of damaging educational policy that has resulted in the need to preserve tribal languages.

What are the impacts of SB 342?

SB 342 goes beyond mere preservation of a language. Research indicates that when tribal language is included as part of regular curriculum, Native American students experience a better quality of life, including increased academic success and pursuit of higher education, increased self-esteem and self-worth, and a greater investment in positive social involvement.

In addition, the inclusion of tribal languages for American Indian students increases their sense of positive cultural identity and belonging to their school environment, which in turn leads to a host of other positive outcomes, such as improved academic performance, prevention of substance abuse, and increased self-esteem.

Increased academic performance and success

Research indicates that schools who integrate Native language programs into teaching Native American youth positively influence students' academic, social and cultural development.⁸ Language-based curriculum and instruction cultivate a strong sense of cultural identity and is often the missing tie to educational achievement of Native American students.⁹ It has also been shown to boost creativity and complex problem solving skills and improve school retention rates.¹⁰

Improved sense of well-being

Schools that include tribal language curriculum will offer students an opportunity to build a positive cultural identity, impacting how they relate to themselves, and to their environments.¹¹ American Indian youth who have a stronger sense of cultural identity, which includes knowledge of tribal language, are less likely to fall into drug and alcohol abuse.^{12 13} When schools include Native language in the curriculum, students tend to have increased self-esteem, experience less anxiety, and show a greater level of self-efficacy.¹⁴

Importance of Tribal Language Preservation Efforts

In the past, education policy has encompassed an assimilationist approach to Indian education, which viewed tribal language as "a liability to be quickly overcome rather than an asset to be built upon."¹⁵ SB 342 will serve to increase collaboration between Montana's Tribes and schools by facilitating develop of tribal language-based curriculum that will enhance current Indian Education for All efforts in reservation schools. By doing so, reservation schools will be able to provide a culturally-based learning environment that will positively impact Native American student achievement.

¹ Pratt, Richard Henry (1973). Official report of the nineteenth annual Conference of Charities and Correction [1892]. In F. P. Prucha (Ed.), *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian," 1880-1900*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

² Mary Eunice Romero Little and Teresa L. McCarty, "Language Planning Challenges and Prospects in Native American Communities and Schools," Language Policy Research Unity, Arizona State University, February 2006.

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- ³ Krauss, M. (1998). The condition of Native North American languages: The need for realistic assessment and action. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 132, 9-21.
- ⁴ Mary Eunice Romero Little and Teresa L. McCarty, February 2006.
- ⁵ Native American Languages Act, 25 U.S.C § 2901-2906.
- ⁶ Mary Eunice Romero Little and Teresa L. McCarty, February 2006.
- ⁷ Montana Code, Title 1, General Laws and Definitions, Chapter 1, General Provisions, Part 5, State Symbols – Official Designations, Section 1-1-510, English as official and primary language of state and local governments.
- ⁸ Demmert, William G., Jr. & Towner, John C. (2003). A review of the research literature on the influences of culturally based education on the academic performance of Native American students. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland Oregon.
- ⁹ Jon Reyhner, "American Indian/Alaska Native Education: An Overview," March 11, 2013.
- ¹⁰ Janine Pease-Pretty On Top, "Native American Language Immersion: Innovative Native Education For Children & Families," (October 2003). Report research supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Michigan.
- ¹¹ Tennant, E. 1993. The "Eye of Awareness": Probing the Hidden Dimension of Bilingual Education. In *Proceedings of the Third National Research Symposium on Limited English Proficient Student Issues*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education: Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs.
- ¹² Joshua A. Fishman, (1991). *Reversing Language Shift*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, England.
- ¹³ Maria Napoli, Flavio Francisco Marsiglia, and Stephen Kulis, "Sense of Belonging in School as a Protective Factor Against Drug Abuse Among Native American Urban Adolescents," *Journal of Social Work Practice in Addictions*, 2003 March 1; 3(2): 25-41.
- ¹⁴ Hakuta, Kenji. Testimony, United States Commission on Civil Rights. "The Education of Language Minority Students." April 13, 2001. Pp. 2.
- ¹⁵ Jon Reyhner, "American Indian Cultures and School Success," *Journal of American Indian Education*, October 1992 (Vol. 32, Num. 1).